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INTERVIEW

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"It comes down to dealing with people": A conversation with Brennen Ferguson, Haudenosaunee Confederacy

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Brennen Ferguson is a citizen of the Tuscarora Nation—one of the six nations comprising the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. He sits on the Council of Chiefs and Clan Mothers in Tuscarora on behalf of the Turtle Clan family. He is also a member of the Haudenosaunee External Relations Committee (HERC). The HERC is mandated by the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee. Part of the mandate is to maintain and develop international relations with nation-states as well as with other Indigenous Nations. The interview took place on April 18, 2023

Peter Larsen (PL): You've recently been involved in a process of restitution with the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva. Could you briefly introduce yourself and tell us a bit of your experience with that restitution.

Brennen Ferguson (BF): My name is Brennen Ferguson, and I'm from the Tuscarora Nation—one of the six nations as part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. I also sit on the Council of Chiefs and Clan Mothers here in Tuscarora. That is the governing structure of our territory. So back in July 2022, I was part of a delegation of the Haudenosaunee to the United Nations. It was myself, Kenneth Deer, Carissa John, and there were a couple of others. We had an Indigenous Peoples Caucus meeting hosted by the MEG—the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva—and after the meeting, Carine (the museum's director) invited us all to view the permanent exhibit. It's a very impressive museum, and we came across a section that had Haudenosaunee items. We saw some moccasins, some bags, and then down toward the interior of the exhibit, in the glass cases, we saw one or two of our sacred items. We have different words for them, but we just refer to them as a medicine mask, and they're usually accompanied by a turtle rattle. They kind of work together. So, we recognized it right away, of course, and it's kind of troubling to see these things. It's nothing new. There are still hundreds of them in museums here in the United States, even. We've gotten hundreds of them back. There's still more out there. But it was kind of shocking to see one all the way over in Switzerland. So, then Carine invited us for lunch afterward, just Kenneth and me. And at lunch I brought it up. I said, you know, "I saw one of our sacred items in your display case," and I described it. She said, "Yes, yes, we've had that for a while." And I just asked that they take it off of public display for now. And she said, "Of course, no problem." So, I think while we were still eating lunch, she sent somebody down there to take it out. And then it was still kind of nagging on my mind, like, "What's going to happen now?" So, then I just asked, "What would we have to do to get it returned to us?" And the response was, "I don't know. We've never really done anything like that before," she said. "You could send a letter and see what happens." So that's what we did. We went back, came back home. We brought it to the committee, and the recommendation was to draft a letter and send it back to the museum. And that's what we did. Got the letter sent over there, you know, explaining its significance and requesting that it be returned to us. Within two months, I would say, we got a response where the museum, the board, the city, you know, all the powers that be all agreed to return the mask to us, which was pretty exciting! Like I said, in the United States, dealing with museums, it's rarely that easy. So, it was a very welcome surprise that it was such an easy process. We made arrangements to go and get it. And in February 2023, we held the restitution event with the museum. They turned it over to us and we brought it home.

PL: And how are you dealing with it at home now? The return of such a sacred mask?

BF: Right. So, it's more of a private thing. These masks, we believe, have a certain power, and we deal with them ceremonially. It's more something nowadays that we kind of gatekeep; it's a protected thing of our culture. There is information out there. Anthropologists of the past have documented it.

PL: That's perfectly fine. It's interesting what you were just mentioning now, you know, about the hundreds of different masks. Our special section here in the journal is about decoloniality and heritage across the world, with museums, monuments, sites, objects, and so on. From what you've experienced in the external committee and perhaps elsewhere, what do you see as some of the challenges of dealing with restitution right now for your nation?

BF: There are a few that come to mind. And I'll also add in that in the United States, there's a law called NAGPRA, the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act. It puts legal pressure on museums that receive federal funding to engage with Native Peoples for things such as sacred items and human remains. Those are the main ones that they have to engage with us in. And even with that, museums tend to sometimes drag out the process, using different stalling mechanisms. I haven't been involved in this work for too long. There are others that could talk better to it. But I know one of the main things, especially when it came to our wampum belts and getting those back, was the monetary value put on them. Some of them had, and this was back in the 1980s, a $1 million insurance policy. So, you think of an institution that has multiple belts and they have this high dollar figure associated with them. They're going to be reluctant to give them to anybody. I think it's just the arrogance, I guess, of some of these museums, where they think that these items are best with them and not with us. I'm sure in the past and even in the present, there's racism involved. So, I would say it's not just one thing that makes it difficult sometimes. NAGPRA only applies or only puts pressure on institutions that receive federal funding. So then there are the private collections, where there's really nothing we can do other than hope that they engage with us in good faith and respectfully and be understanding of why these things are important to us and why they need to be with our people. And if they don't understand that, there's not a whole bunch that we can do otherwise. And I'd say that MEG is kind of in that category. NAGPRA doesn't apply to the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva. They dealt with us in good faith and in a respectful way. And that's all it takes, really. With or without NAGPRA.

PL: A lot of the conversations we've had in our group are concerned with the partial nature of decolonizing exhibitions, sites, and so on. We've had attempts in our country to decolonize the way we do museums, to decolonize the way we do exhibitions, to engage with people, and so on. But the fact of the matter is that there are still some sort of colonial practices that remain. They're sort of not transformed overnight. I was just wondering if you might have any thoughts in that respect based on your experience?

BF: You know, I would argue that museums, as an institution, are a direct product of colonialism. So I don't know if you could ever decolonize a colonial institution.

But I think there are ways where, again, it comes down to dealing with people. One thing I've learned is that it's all down to the people that are working in these museums. Because at the end of the day, you're not working with some mystical entity. You're working with real people. And depending on their perceptions and depending on their values, those really determine how the work goes. Again, dealing with the MEG and Carine was such a breath of fresh air. It could really be used as an example for how this could happen. That being said, I think museums have a long history of extracting these types of things from Indigenous Peoples for their own collections. Not just in North America, but all over the world. If you're going to go along a process of decolonization, it would concern how these museums think about what their relationship looks like with the Indigenous Peoples whose items they possess. So, for instance, the museum, the MEG, couldn't decide what was appropriate to do with that mask. We had to decide that. And they had to be willing to engage with us in a respectful manner. And they were! And I think that's exactly the process we're looking for. To engage with us in respect to what items are ours and let us decide what is appropriate. Because like I said, they had other items there. They had moccasins and bags. And for us, that's kind of been our policy: we're okay with those things remaining in the museums. But we're not okay with our sacred items and our human remains remaining in museums. And that's for us to decide. And we can only decide that for Haudenosaunee items. I can't determine what's appropriate for South American people or African people in respect to their items. They have to decide for themselves what's appropriate.

PL: My last question to you is basically asking about your vision of decolonial heritage and the decolonial museum. What you do see as the role of sciences like anthropology in that field? I don't know how familiar you are with anthropology and anthropologists, but given that this is an anthropological journal, I also wanted to pitch this question at the end to see if you had any reflections on that.

BF: Right. And I have quite a few. To me, they're kind of one and the same. They both could be handled in a similar manner. So, one thing I did just mention are the things that we don't ask to be returned to us, like moccasins, bags, basketry, and pottery. Those types of things, that's kind of been our policy that we allow museums to keep them with the understanding that they give us access to them when we want the access because we still have crafters and makers and families in our communities that have maintained these practices. If they want to look at them, the museum should let

FIGURE 1 Restitution at the Museum of Ethnography, Geneva, 2023. (Credit: MEG) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

us look at them and then we can revive and bring these practices back to life within our own communities. That it's a living part of our culture and not just something that we go look at in a museum.

PL: It makes a lot of sense.

BF: And that has happened because, like all cultures, different components of our culture have evolved over time. A major one that comes to mind is the way we decorate our clothing, where a huge evolution process took place between the late 1600s and the early 1800s. The early forms of decorating ourselves was with using things like dyed moose hair and porcupine quills. And as the trade continued, those things were kind of replaced by glass beads. And, you know, Native American beadwork is pretty well known and pretty famous. The Haudenosaunee were no different. We kind of had our own styles that evolved with the beads. But as time went on, the beads completely replaced the quill work and the moose hair work. And then those techniques were pretty much forgotten. But there were collections of our ancestors' crafts that included moose hair, embroidery, and porcupine quill work that we can go look at today. And we can look at it and our skilled crafters can understand how it was constructed and they can revive that practice. And it is something that is happening today that I've seen just in the last 10 years or so where you're starting to see a lot more moose hair embroidery as well as porcupine quill work coming back into our culture of crafting.

And the anthropologists. They have a very complicated history for us, to say the least. There are two main ones that come to mind. The first one being Lewis Henry Morgan. He was active in the late 1800s, and he's considered one of the fathers of anthropology. He did the bulk of his work on the Haudenosaunee, and his main work published was called *League of the Iroquois*. And the next one that comes to mind, who was a little bit more controversial of a figure, was William Fenton. He did an extreme amount of gathering of our ceremonial practices, recording our elders. And he really became like an authority on Haudenosaunee culture. That's how much he dedicated to his collections and his practice as an anthropologist. And then later in life, when our people were trying to get our things back from museums, he really said some very insulting things about our people. After he had made an entire career working with our elders, he turned around and insulted our people in a pretty severe way. He testified against or he wrote a letter not supporting the return of our items to our people after he made an entire career out of the grace of our people working with him. So, he kind of smeared his own legacy in that way. Because today we do use a lot of Fenton's work. He did record and preserve some important knowledge that might not have been passed down in certain families. And so it is a useful set of information that he collected. And we use it a lot, to tell you the truth. Even as a reference, things that we think we understand, we can reference it to Fenton and it turns out they match up 100 percent. So, we know that he was recording things accurately. And there are some things that he recorded that maybe we had forgotten. So, there is a usefulness to it. But there is a history of not dealing in good faith when it comes to Fenton.

PL: Do you see a potential now for a different role working together in good faith from a decolonial perspective? What do you see in that direction, if anything?

BF: I think what we have today is that our own people are starting to be trained in these types of things. And so we know that they're being trained and they're taking upon themselves to learn these methods, and they can be of use to us. That's kind of a big difference I'm seeing today, where it's our own people doing the work. And they're not necessarily doing it to make a career for themselves. They're doing it really to help us. Help us

collectively. And that's the goal that they have when they become educated this way. So that's the biggest difference. It's our own people mostly working in these museums, working in the field, doing anthropology work, doing archaeological work. It's Haudenosaunee people doing that now.

PL: That is a big shift. And you feel also that the way they do it differs, that when your own people are trained and so on, that they end up doing it in a different way?
BF: Well, they're doing it with the intention of being useful to the community at large. Even when they get started, you know, "I want to become a trained archaeologist so that I can do this for our people." And oftentimes, it's people that come from our communities and are raised in the culture and are raised with the perspective of what it means to be a Tuscarora person or an Onondaga person, or a Seneca person, and so forth. So that is where they're rooted. They're a Seneca person first or a Tuscarora person first, and then they're an archaeologist or an anthropologist or just a researcher.

PL: We could continue this conversation at so many different levels. To end from an Indigenous perspective: What do you think would it really take to move towards decolonizing exhibitions and the ways sites are being managed?

BF: The answer to that is quite simple. When it comes to our materials, you just have to ask us what is appropriate. And if we say "return them", then return them. If we say give us unrestricted access to them, then that's what it takes to decolonize it. If we say . . . whatever it is that we say, that would be the decolonial process, because it's about how it serves these materials or the people where these materials originated from. How do they serve those people, while they're in your collections? And you can't determine that; the Indigenous People that they originate from have to determine that. What it would take is these institutions having the willingness to engage with us and to take our direction when it comes to our own material.

PL: I think that's a wonderful way of ending the interview, actually. Finally, among museum institutions, the MEG is probably an exception. Are others resistant about these things?

BF: Yeah, the restitution experience with the MEG could be almost a blueprint for how these processes can go. It really set the example. What was unique about the experience was that they dealt directly with us. And they returned these items directly to us. In similar situations, what would have taken place is they would have dealt with some agency in Canada. They would have returned the items to Canada, who then would have turned them over to us. So rather than dealing directly with us, we would have been like on the side of the negotiations happening between the museum and Canada. It would be with the understanding that Canada hopefully would turn the items over to us once they got them. What was different about this process in Switzerland was that the mayor and the city of Geneva dealt directly with the Haudenosaunee. And that's the most important part, like I keep on saying: it's about engaging directly with us to determine what happens with these materials Figure 1.
PL: Thank you, Brennen.

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